

*A Covenant Understanding
of the Old Testament:*

THE FORMER PROPHETS

Introduction

As we transition out of the Pentateuch (Genesis-Deuteronomy) into the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings), we will continue to anchor ourselves in the threefold theme of the covenants: land, descendants, and relationship with God. Here in the Former Prophets we see the fourth of our covenants, the Davidic covenant (2 Samuel 7).

The last book of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy, heavily exerts itself on the Former Prophets from the starting point, but so does the exile from the end point. These are our bookends for the time when Israel enters into and lives in the promised land. By the way, the exile also marks the break between the former and latter prophets. The books of the Former Prophets occur before the exile, the books of the Latter Prophets span before, during, and after the exile. In fact, the best way to look at the Former Prophets is as a cohesive narrative arc *which explains the exile*.

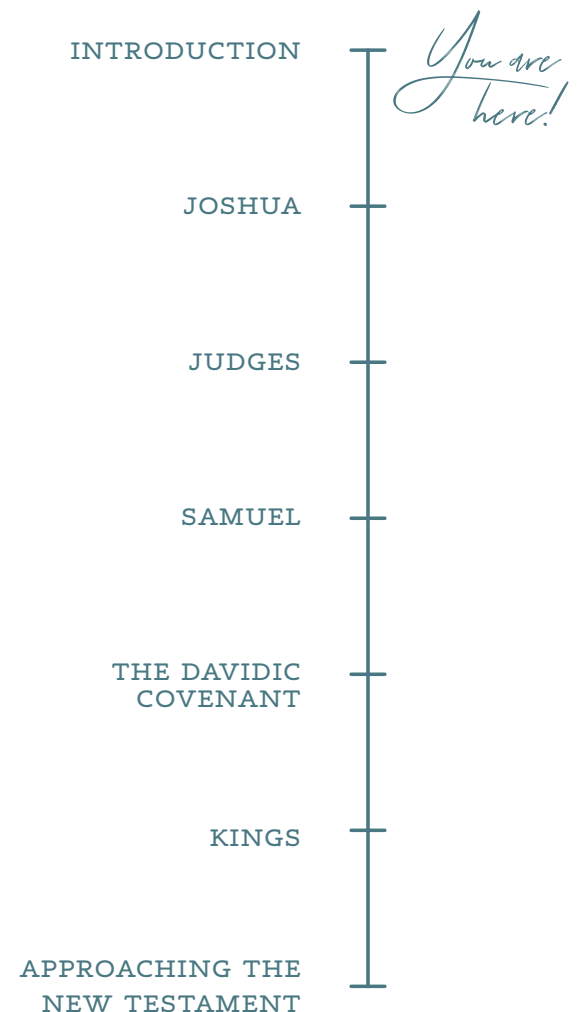
There are many theories about when the books of the Former Prophets were written, but some scholars believe that these books were written during the exile to help Israel hold on to (or regain) her faith during that dark time (Longman/Dillard 2006). One can only imagine the question Israel was asking herself during the exile was ‘How did this happen?’ The record of the Former Prophets answers that question with little room for argument. Authorship and date of writing is not as important for our purposes as the theological unity that we find in these books.

One of the unique characteristics of the Former Prophets is found in the seams, or transitions between the books. In all cases we see a tight movement from one to the next. This further underscores the way that they should be read and understood: as a unit.

If the Pentateuch provides the foundations of our Old Testament understanding with the themes of land, descendants and relationship with God, the books of the Former Prophets continue to expand on those themes and provide additional strength to these foundations which enlighten all of the books that follow, including the New Testament. Looking at the stories about Israel conquering and living in the promised land helps us to see humanity’s desperate need for God.

Reiterate here the marker between the Former and Latter prophets:

Look at the former prophets as a cohesive narrative arc which explains the exile.



Look AT Context

To understand the bookends that border the Former Prophets, read the following passages and reflect upon them.

DEUTERONOMY 31:14-29 leads us into the Former Prophets. Reflect on the notable prophecies.

2 KINGS 25:1-26 leads us out of the Former Prophets. Note any parallels between this passage and **DEUTERONOMY 31:14-29**:

Based on your look at **DEUTERONOMY 31:14-29** and **2 KINGS 25:1-26**, what do you expect to see happen inside the books of the Former Prophets?

Can you put these expectations into the context of land, descendants, and relationship with God? Think broadly about these thematic threads. Feel free to refer back to the Pentateuch section of this study if needed:





*You are
here!*

INTRODUCTION JOSHUA

JUDGES

SAMUEL

THE DAVIDIC
COVENANT

KINGS

THE NEW
TESTAMENT

Joshua

Just as we found in the Pentateuch, some books are more easily identified with one particular part of the threefold covenant theme. This trend continues into the Former Prophets. There is no doubt the books of the Former Prophets are all land-heavy. They are, on the surface, about entering into and living in the promised land. Therefore, the book of Joshua is the next natural progression from where Moses left us in Deuteronomy, at the border of the promised land.

One important note about the transition from Deuteronomy to Joshua is zero elapsed time. This is one of the tight seams between the books in this unit of the Old Testament.

Read **DEUTERONOMY 31:1-8** and note the close handoff:

Look at the following passages and note your overview of the land theme in the book of Joshua:

DEUTERONOMY 6:10-12, 19:1-2

EXODUS 23:23-30

NUMBERS 33:50-56 (CROSS REF. JOSHUA 6:24, 8:28, 11:13)

The book of Joshua can be easily split into three segments: the taking of the land (Joshua 1-12), the allotment of the land (Joshua 13-21) and the retaining of the land (Joshua 22-24). This is the refrain of Joshua: the Lord gave the land and Israel took it (v 11:23). However, the success we see Israel experience in chapters 1-12 begins a steady decline as the Former Prophets progress.

How does the book of Joshua fit in the larger story arc? The interplay of land, descendants, and relationship with God is so tightly woven that it's almost indiscernible where one begins and the other ends.

Write your reflections on some examples of land, descendants, and relationship with God in the book of Joshua, found in the following verses: 2:24, 3:5, 3:15-16, 5:15, 6:20, 7:11-12, 8:30-35, 10:14, 11:23:

This is the refrain of Joshua: the Lord gave the land and Israel took it.

Personal Application

Take a moment here to reflect on the principle we introduced in the first part of this study:

CONCEPTS WHICH OCCURRED PHYSICALLY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT OFTEN OCCUR SPIRITUALLY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT. Using some of the verses above as a springboard, how can you personally apply the concept of the physical promised land in your spiritual life?

Extend the concept into descendants and relationship with God. Do you identify with Israel as they experienced God in these ways?

Run a spiritual trajectory from your salvation experience (Exodus) and your wilderness wanderings (Numbers, Leviticus, Deuteronomy) to your spiritual promised land (Joshua). Describe the ways that relationship with God and descendants coincide in your spiritual journey. Don't forget that you would *be* a spiritual descendant as easily as you might *have* spiritual descendants:

PAUSE BEFORE YOU GO ON

This is deep internal work. You will be blessed to do it thoughtfully and prayerfully. Ask God to show you the personal applications you can take away from these Old Testament narratives. But shore up your strength. As we walk with Israel into the time of the judges and the monarchy, we will be tracking our own sinful tendencies so that we can really learn from what Israel experienced, not just observe it.

*You are
here!*



Judges

The very end of the book of Joshua also has a tight seam into the book of Judges, though not in the way we saw between Deuteronomy and Joshua where there was no elapsed time.

Read Joshua 24:31. Prayerfully interpret this passage in the context of land, descendants, and relationship with God. Note how it foreshadows what we find in Judges:

Bruce Waltke says that the judges we find in this book would be more appropriately called ‘warlords’ in our modern English (Waltke 2007). These are not robed, esteemed interpreters of the law. Rather, they are powerful and courageous leaders whom God uses to enact his judgement on the surrounding peoples and continue to set Israel apart as a people unto himself. By taking on the role of ‘divine warrior’ God “enacts justice for the benefit of Israel and for the sake of creation” (Brueggemann, Warrior God 2013). In each case God is sure to make clear that the victory is divine, not human.

The trajectory of Israel during the time of the judges is often described as a downward spiral. To understand this downward spiral, we must first understand the cycle of the narrative in the book of Judges: sin, oppression, repentance, deliverance, rest. When Israel finds rest in the land (Joshua 23:1) it doesn’t take long for that rest to become complacency. In complacency, Israel sins. The divine retribution for this sin is oppression by her enemies. This oppression leads to repentance, the repentance to deliverance. Then, unfortunately, the rest leads again to sin.

For more on this cycle, review the following passages:

SIN: 2:11; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1

OPPRESSION: 2:14; 3:8; 4:2; 10:9

REPENTANCE: 3:9, 15; 6:6-7; 10:10

DELIVERANCE: 2:16; 3:9, 15; 10:1, 12

REST: 3:10-11; 8:28-32; 10:2-5; 12:9-15

You won't necessarily have to share your thoughts with the group, but for the sake of your own spiritual growth, can you note the ways that this cycle may have applied to you? What parallels do you see in your own spiritual journey?

Can you also note ways that you identify and break this cycle? Or even better, prevent it from getting started in your spiritual life?

Noting that we saw in both Joshua and Judges that when Israel was trusting and obeying God, she was virtually invincible, can you relate this to your spiritual life?

With each progressive judge you will notice the sins become more and more heinous, until the dark end of the book, Judges 21:25. This is why the book of Judges is described as a downward spiral. Each time the nation returns to the beginning of the cycle, it does so a little (or a lot) lower in moral depravity than the cycle before.

God is willing and able to lead Israel in relational victory. As in Joshua, the military victories are often miraculous, leaving no doubt Who is responsible. However, after strong spiritual leaders like Moses and Joshua, the Judges fall short. They often experience only fleeting intimacy with God just in time for the moment of the battle. Afterwards they turn (or return) to wicked ways. This book makes acute the need for God-honoring leadership. Compare the last verse of Judges (21:25) with Deuteronomy 31:27-29:

Write your reflections on the book of Judges and how you see the covenant themes of land, descendants, and relationship with God playing out in this book:

*You are
here!*



Samuel

The book of Judges, and especially the foreshadowing of verse 21:25, leads directly into the book of Samuel, where we meet Israel's first kings. This is another of the close-knit seams we described earlier. Each of the books in this section of the Old Testament builds upon the one before. Therefore, it's ok to read any section of one of these books or indeed the whole book apart from a reading of the rest, but we must stay cognizant of the entire story. Anything else would be like walking in during the middle of a movie and walking out before the end, then complaining the story didn't make sense to you.

There are a few important components to the book of Samuel. First, we want to understand why it was a sin for Israel to ask for a king.

Second, we want to look carefully at the Davidic covenant both in light of the previous covenants and also in light of what would come after David.

We don't want to limit this 'after David' consideration to the immediate historical context of the subsequent kings in Israel/Judah. That would be short-sighted and not in keeping with our primary goal of incorporating this information into a New Testament point of view. We are, however, limited by the constraints of this study which is a survey of the Old Testament and not a deep dive. Be encouraged to come back to this study often as you dive deeply into whatever parts light you up! The goal is to get you excited about reading and understanding how it all fits together so that you are never without context to understand exactly what you are reading and how it informs your understanding of Christ.

In the book of Samuel, again, we see the application of Deuteronomy over the entire narrative of the Former Prophets. Particularly Deuteronomy 17:14-20 which also provides insight to our first challenge: why was it a sin for Israel to ask for a king?

Read Deuteronomy 17:14-20. List as many ‘do’s and don’t’s as you can find:

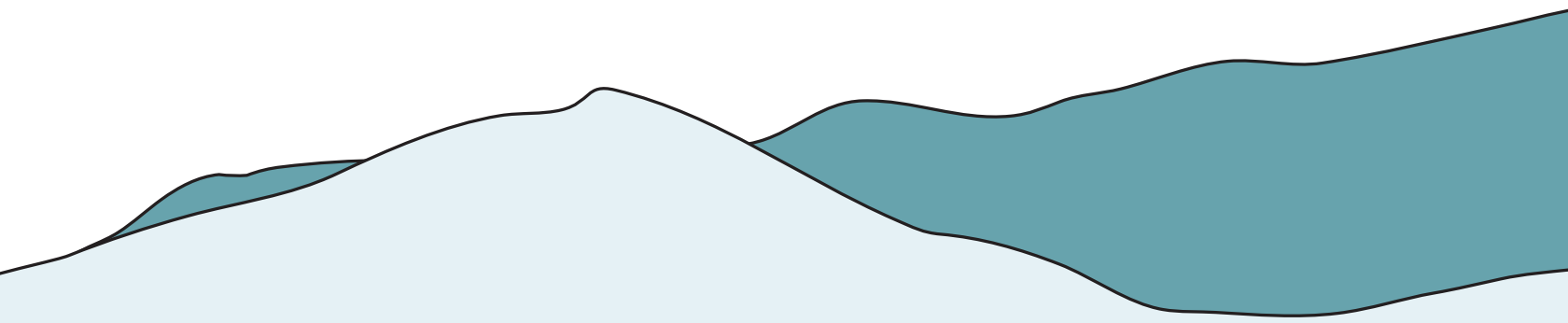
Look carefully at Deuteronomy 17:14. Do you see any hints about what Israel was asking for and why?

Read 1 Samuel 12 and note two things: How does this passage show us the sin of Israel in asking for a king (v 12)?

How does this passage compare with Deuteronomy 31:14-22?

How do these passages integrate the covenant themes of land, descendants, and relationship with God?





*You are
here!*

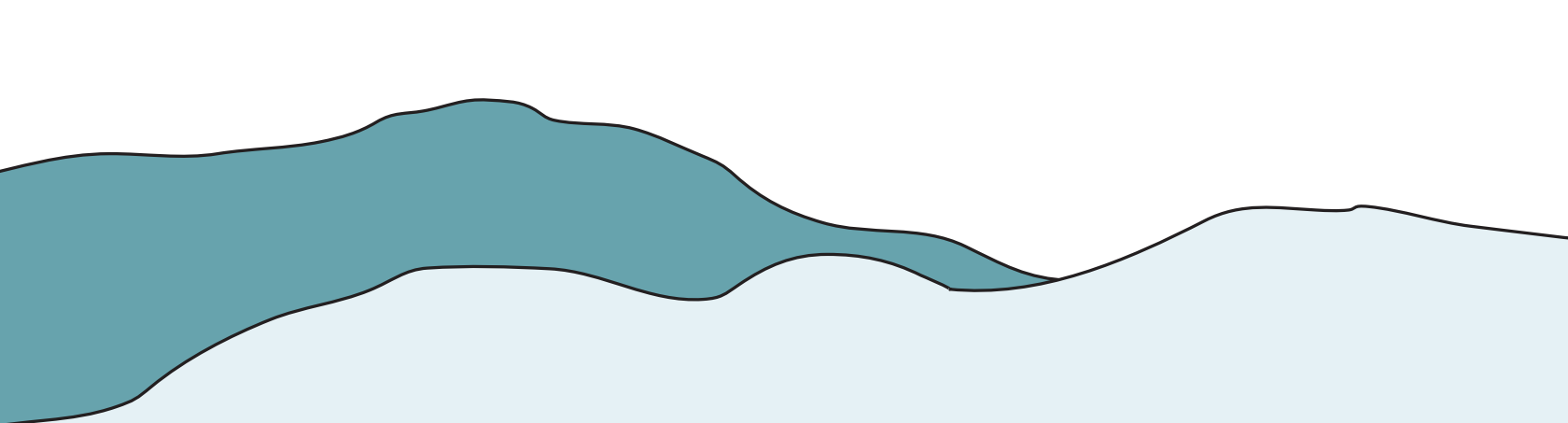


The Davidic Covenant

The close ties which bind the Davidic covenant to the Abrahamic, Noahic, and Mosaic covenants are evidence of continuity in the promise of God, ultimately realized in Christ. Understanding the implications and promises in the Davidic covenant gives us a deeper understanding of the bible as a whole and shows that God's love, demonstrated in the characteristics of the promise and plan, is eternal and global, with past, present, and future implications. The Davidic covenant "builds on the preceding covenants and looks forward to the ultimate establishment of God's reign on the earth" (Grisanti 1999).

We have, of course, the special advantage of Messianic perspective on this and other Old Testament texts, which gives us the ability to synthesize them in light of the cross. While some texts show the Messianic hope in more overt ways than others, the Messianic hope expressed in the Old Testament is pervasive. "The conclusion that David was the anointed historical figure par excellence and that the eschatological messiah is to be found in his descendants is reinforced throughout the rest of the Old Testament" (Block 2003).

To see clearly the thread that runs through all eternity, we must not only look back at the promises that came before, but also the ways that the Davidic promise echoes through many of the biblical texts that follow it, most notably in the Prophets and the Psalms but also into the New Testament. Here also is where we see the wide global reach of this promise, to God's reign over all of the earth. As such, we could regard the Davidic covenant as the "most crucial theological statement in the Old Testament" (Brueggemann 1990).




Read the Davidic covenant found in 2 Samuel 7:1-17. Note the following: How does this covenant differ from those in the Pentateuch (Noahic Genesis 9, Abrahamic Genesis 12, Mosaic Exodus 19, 24)?

How is it similar?

How does it demonstrate an expansion to understanding God's plan for all people across all time?

In what verses do you see the covenant themes of land, descendants and special relationship with God?

McClain beautifully sums up the implications of the covenants being so closely tied together by saying the Davidic covenant “consisted of a reaffirmation of the regal terms of the original Abrahamic Covenant; with the further provision that these covenanted rights will now attach permanently to the historic house and succession of David; and also that by God’s grace these rights, even if historically interrupted for a season, will at last in a future kingdom be restored to the nation in perpetuity with no further possibility of interruption” (McClain 1974). That last part is key, and we will return to it when we study the Latter Prophets in the next unit.



The promises of the Davidic covenant in vv. 1-17 cannot be read in isolation. David's response in the following verses (18-29) provides us a lens through which to see the magnitude of what God has promised.

First, we should note that we see David oscillating between singular and plural wording. This “exhibits the biblical writer’s concept of corporate solidarity” (Kaiser 1974). The covenant echoes through his time in the nation of Israel and through our own time as well.

David’s response shows prophetic recognition of the far-reaching implications of God’s promise. He responds to each segment in turn by showing recognition for: what God has done for Israel in the past (vv. 6-7, 22-24), what God has done for David in the present (vv. 9-11, 18-21), and what this promise means for the future (vv. 12-14, 25-29).

David later demonstrates his understanding of the promise in Psalm 95*, including spiritual elements of belief and trust (Kaiser 1974), as well as in Psalm 21:7b where David rejoices in the fact that Yahweh “has made him most blessed forever” (Kaiser 1974).

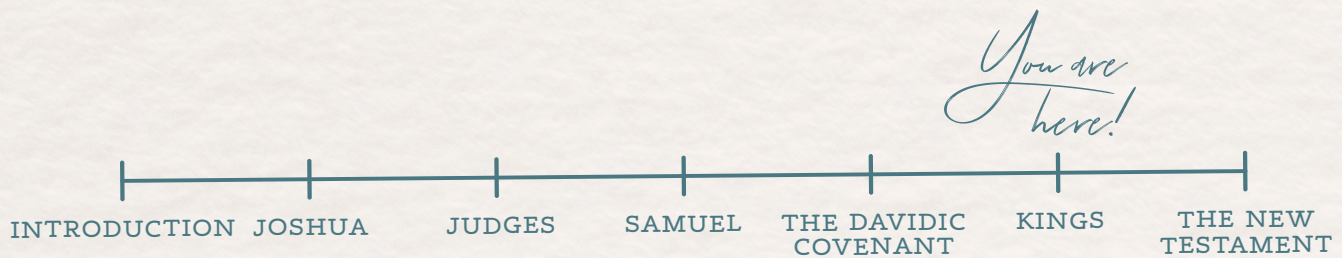
Finally, at his life’s end, David knows this promise is the sparkling gem of his years and intimate loving relationship with Yahweh. This is reflected in 2 Samuel 23:5. A good beginning to understanding the implications of the Davidic covenant, then, starts with David’s own understanding of it in the moment. This passage demonstrates “both the centrality of this promise in the unfolding revelation of God and the conscious awareness David had of the universal and messianic implications of that promise” (Kaiser 1974).

That’s a lot to absorb. Write your reflections here:



* Psalm 95

DOESN'T OVERTLY CLAIM TO BE WRITTEN BY DAVID. SO HOW CAN WE BE SURE THAT IT IS REFLECTING AN UNDERSTANDING OF GOD AS KING AND MOREOVER, THAT IT WAS WRITTEN BY DAVID IN RESPONSE TO THE COVENANTAL PROMISES OF GOD? PSALMS 93-99 ARE CALLED ROYAL PSALMS. EACH OF THEM REFLECTS DIFFERENT FACETS OF UNDERSTANDING OF GOD AS ISRAEL'S KING. SINCE 95 IS NESTLED SQUARELY IN THIS SECTION OF THE PSALMS, WE KNOW THAT THE REFLECTIONS IN IT ARE IN PRAISE OF GOD AS KING OF KINGS (V.3). IN HEBREWS 4:7, THE AUTHOR CITES THIS PSALM AND CREDITS DAVID WITH THE AUTHORSHIP. SO IN THIS CASE, WE ALLOW SCRIPTURE TO TEACH SCRIPTURE. ANY TIME YOU FIND SOME CONFLICT OR CONFUSION IN YOUR BIBLE READING, PRAYERFULLY ASK GOD TO LEAD YOU TO OTHER SCRIPTURES THAT CAN SHED LIGHT.



Kings

David Block claims that “the Old Testament is a record of God’s gracious reach to fallen humankind within history, it is indeed filled with hope, but to characterize this as an overtly and pervasively messianic hope is to overstate the case” (Block 2003). As we progress in our study together, we might find that we disagree. As Block astutely observes, the messianic hope may not often be overtly stated. However, to miss the pervasiveness of messianic hope in the Old Testament would be to miss the point of God’s eternal and global promise. Allowing for the retrospective position we occupy, and also allowing for the fact that some implications may even have been hidden from the prophets and writers themselves, it still seems clear that the later texts understand the Davidic covenant and the failure of the kings as pointing to a greater king in the future: Christ.

Bearing in mind the book of Kings, a big part of the narrative which explains Israel’s predicament in the exile, we can candidly say any reading of the book of Kings is a frustrating one, since none of the kings seemed to get it right. First, we have the split into northern and southern kingdoms. It can be a bit confusing how the text bounces back and forth between north (Israel) and south (Judah), so here is the cheat sheet for the book of Kings: none of the northern (Israel) monarchs was good. None. Only 8 of the southern (Judah) monarchs were good: Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, Amaziah, Azariah, Jotham, Hezekiah and Josiah.

To be sure, land is a prevalent theme in Kings, since the nation was still enjoying the promised land. But we continue to see the weaving together of our other two elements: descendants and special relationship with God. In fact, at this point in the narrative there is a decided shift. Centrality of worship becomes predominant.

God had always been clear on how he was to be worshiped and that he alone was to be the object of worship. This now is the measuring stick by which each of the kings is judged. In the narratives of each monarchy, the king is noted whether he did or did not ‘tear down the high places,’ which means he did or did not destroy the worship of other gods in his kingdom. Of course, in this, we see our covenant theme of special relationship with God. God offers a special relationship with himself to Israel, but he expects the same in return. Scan the book of Kings and give a rough estimate of how many times the ‘high places’ are referenced:

Here is a short list (not complete) for reference about the high places: 1 Kings 3:2-3; 1 Kings 11:7; 1 Kings 12:31; 1 Kings 15:14; 1 Kings 22:43; 2 Kings 12:2-3; 2 Kings 14:3-4; 2 Kings 15:3-4; 2 Kings 17:11; 2 Kings 18:4; 2 Kings 23:5, 8, 20. Why do you think this is so important in the book of Kings?

Read the following passages from Deuteronomy and note your observations on how each text applies to Kings:

Deuteronomy 12

Deuteronomy 17:14-20

Deuteronomy 18:9-22

Deuteronomy 28

Reflect here on how the words in Deuteronomy, written so many years before the time of the kings, inform your understanding of the element of descendants in the covenants:



The stipulations of the Mosaic Covenant provide the standard for the reign of each of these kings (2 Kings 18:6; 21:7-9; 23:24-25). The king was to lead Israel in keeping the covenant and relying on God for deliverance. The king was the covenant administrator, trusting Yahweh to deliver on his promises. He was obligated to be personally loyal to Yahweh and to lead Israel in loyalty as well. When necessary, the king might need to take action on behalf of Yahweh (i.e., tearing down the ‘high places’ of worship to other gods). The king was to prioritize Torah and ensure Israel did the same.

Recalling that the Mosaic and Davidic covenants share elements of blessing/curse resulting in the conditions under which elements of the promise could be enjoyed, we see that promise executed throughout the book of Kings. When the king honored the covenant both he and, by extension, the people he ruled were blessed in the ways that God promised. When the king dishonored the covenant, both he and, by extension, the people he ruled were disciplined in the ways that God promised (clear statement of penalty in Deuteronomy 30:15-18, clear penalty in 2 Kings 24). The king was always held accountable for the direction of Israel’s affections.

Indeed, God will always keep his word. Thankfully, “the treacherous conduct of any one or series of Davidic rulers does not hazard the ultimate realization of [the covenant] provisions” (Grisanti 1999). Because of the unconditional components of the promise, fulfilled in Christ, we can see from our present perspective that all of these historical occurrences point to messianic hope. Perhaps not overtly, as Block points out, but pervasively.

How do you think influences of land, descendants and relationship with God positively or negatively impacted the kings?

Do the concepts of scarcity (wilderness) vs. bounty (promised land) and dependence (wilderness) vs. sufficiency (promised land) have any spiritual echoes in your own faith?

Approaching the New Testament

We're going to do the heaviest lift of New Testament consideration at the very end of our study. However, at this juncture, we can look at an important facet: a Trinitarian read of the Old Testament. The early church read the Old Testament without redaction and the strength of the Old Testament canon was assumed. When Jesus became a reality, the early church did not ask the question, 'What do we do with the Hebrew canon now that Jesus has arrived?' Rather, the question was 'How do we understand Jesus in the light of the Old Testament?' The unit of the Former Prophets is an important component in understanding that answer.

Read Luke 24 and reflect on what Jesus might have been explaining from the unit of the Former Prophets:

Read Romans 1:1-4 and note the relevance to the Former Prophets.

A Trinitarian read of the Old Testament is not an imposition. It organically flows from all of the elements that always existed. A Trinitarian read of the Old Testament is also not anachronistic: God is timeless. The Trinity was in existence even before God revealed that truth to us. The Trinitarian read of the Old Testament mirrors our understanding of the covenants: we see only in hindsight how the elements of land, descendants and relationship with God were present as early as the garden. God formalized these elements later in the covenants, which gives us a different perspective on the primeval history, but it doesn't change that these elements were already in play whether people were able to define them at that time or not. The same is true for the Trinity.

Write your reflections on how the Trinity shows up in the Old Testament:

WORKS CITED*

* Following is a list of Works Cited for the entire 'Understanding the Old Testament' study. All bible references are from the ESV unless otherwise indicated.

- Block, Daniel. "My Servant David: Ancient Israel's Vision of the Messiah." In *Israel's Messiah in the Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, by R.S. Hess and M.D.R. Carroll, 17-56. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *First and Second Samuel*. Louisville: John Knox, 1990.
- . "Warrior God." *The Christian Century*, December 25, 2013: 30-31.
- Clines, David. *The Theme of the Pentateuch*. Kings Lynn, Norfolk: Sheffield Academic Press, 2004.
- Dempster, Stephen. "'A Light in a Dark Place': A Tale of Two Kings and Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament." *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 2010: 18-26.
- . *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003.
- Dumbrell, William J. *Covenant and Creation : An Old Testament Covenant Theology*. ProQuest Ebook Central: Authentic Media, March 22, 2013.
- Gignilliat, Mark. OT 602 Lecture 13: TaNaKh, Law, Prophets and Writings. Fort Lauderdale, August 17, 2017.
- Gignilliat, Mark. OT 602 Lecture 21: The Torah: Leviticus. Fort Lauderdale, FL, August 17, 2017.
- Gignilliat, Mark. OT 602 Lecture 22: Numbers and Deuteronomy. Fort Lauderdale, August 17, 2017.
- Grisanti, Michael A. "The Davidic Covenant." *The Masters Seminary Journal*, no. Fall 1999 (October 1999): 233-250.
- House, Paul R. *Old Testament Theology*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998.
- Hwang, Jerry. *Rhetoric of Remembrance : An Investigation of the Fathers in Deuteronomy*. Winona Lake: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012.
- Kaiser, Walter. *The Blessing of David: The Charter for Humanity*. Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co, 1974.
- Ligioneer Ministries. *David's Lord*. Sanford, July 30, 2020.
- Longman/Dillard. *An Introduction to the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006.
- McClain, Alva J. *The Greatness of the Kingdom*. Winona Lake: BMH, 1974.
- McConville, Gordon. "Messianic Interpretation of the Old Testament in Modern Context." In *The Lord's Anointed*, by Satterthwaite and Hess et al., 1-17. Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1995.
- Murphy, Roland. "Theologies of the Old Testament." *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture*, 2002: 163-167.
- Sproul, RC. "The Covenant of Works." *TableTalk Magazine*, October 1, 2006.
- Sproul, RC. *The Promise Keeper: God of the Covenants*. Sanford, FL, October 27, 2020.
- Waltke, Bruce. *An Old Testament Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007.